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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the concept of a family system in terms of an interactive system of interrelated, interdependent parts and suggests that VHS movies can act as perturbations, i.e., change promoting agents, for certain dysfunctional family systems. Several distinct characteristics of a family system are defined with particular emphasis on morphostasis (stability) and morphogenesis (change). A discussion of how families function points out that, although a family system is constantly striving for stability, if it is challenged, it may respond through change and move into a new accepted state. Designed to promote self-education in the family system, the Family Focus VHS Video Guide is described as an attempt to organize certain movies deemed as potential "prompters" of systematic change; this guide is divided into five macro-topic sections containing movies that illustrate certain system processes, including family development and enrichment, adult personal development, cognitive and social skill development, physical health and hygiene, and family management. Examples of system processes are provided by the appended excerpts from three movies, "On Golden Pond," "Places in the Heart," and "Yentl." (DJR)

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VHS Movies

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VHS Movies:

Perturbations for Morphogenesis

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Abstract

It is not uncommon in current literature to view the family as an interactive system. As a system, the family is considered to be a unit continuously striving for morphostasis (stability). In order for a system to remain functional and to maintain morphostasis, it is sometimes necessary for the individuals of that system to experience morphogenesis (change). The author suggests that, for certain dysfunctional family systems, VHS movies can act as a catalyst to promote that change. The Family Focus VHS Video Guide is presented as an attempt to organize certain movies deemed as potential "prompters" of systemic change.

VHS Movies:

Perturbations for Morphogenesis

What is a family? How should the family be conceptualized by researchers and therapists? The answers viewed as appropriate to these and related questions have gone through many stages of development, changing with the flow of time and with the increase of scientific knowledge and theory. Most recently, it has become quite common in literature, both theoretical and therapeutic, to see the family conceptualized as an interactive system of interrelated, interdependent parts (Brill, 1978).

The Family as A SystemDefinition of a System

von Bertalanffy (1966) was among the first to make an analogy between the family and a system, stating that a system was to be defined as a number of parts that are relatively organized so that a change in one or more of the parts is usually accompanied by a change in the other parts. Buckley (1967, p.41) provided an even more elaborate definition, noting that a system was

a complex of elements or components directly or indirectly related in a causal network, such that each component is related to at least some others in a more or less stable way within any particular period of time. . . . The particular kinds of more or less stable interrelationships of components that become established at any time constitute the particular structure of the system at that time, thus achieving a kind of "whole" with some degree of continuity and boundary.

Buckley's definition of a system, while complete, is not parsimonious and, as a result, has recently been replaced by a much shorter, simpler definition, offered up by Prochaska (1984). A system, he stated, is to be defined as a set of units or elements that that in a consistent relationship to one another, such as the relationship between individual family members. Prochaska (p. 329) noted that "even the labels that we give to the individual members, such as parent and child, suggest consistent relationships between them."

Goldenberg and Goldenberg (1980b) emphasized another aspect of Buckley's definition, relating that these component parts interact with one another so that each influences and in turn is influenced by the other parts, producing a whole--a system--greater than the sum of its parts. This "wholeness," they stressed, characterizes the systemic perspective.

Characteristics of a System

The family system, as defined above, has several distinct characteristics. Two of the most notable of these characteristics are morphostasis (or homeostasis) and morphogenesis which will be discussed in the following paragraphs. A third section concerning family functioning will conclude the discussion of systems.

Morphostasis. In family terms, morphostasis, according to Goldenberg and Goldenberg (1980b), refers to the inclination for a system to maintain a dynamic equilibrium around some central tendency, and to undertake the necessary steps to restore that equilibrium whenever it is threatened. Jackson (1968) explains this idea, stating that the system operates within certain limits or parameters, which tend to remain fairly constant. Family morphostasis "implies the relative constancy of the internal environment, a constancy, however, which is maintained by a continuous interplay of dynamic forces" (pp.1-2).

Prochaska (1984) stresses that morphostasis should not be misunderstood to imply rigidity (i.e., a forced and inflexible structuring of behavior). Instead, he states, it is actually a controlled change, a change which allows elements (or persons) to relate meaningfully to each other through a series of control mechanisms. While these control mechanisms keep the individual elements (or persons) within an acceptable set of limits, they also permit adaptation to occur. To Prochaska, this controlled adaptation (or morphogenesis) is the key to meaningful change (1984).

Goldenberg and Goldenberg (1980a) note that each family system will develop its own set of control (or homeostatic) mechanisms, which will keep that particular system in balance. When problems arise or escalate to the point of

endangering the system's normal functioning, these mechanisms, commonly referred to as negative feedback (Foley, 1974), will attempt to return the system to its previous state of equilibrium. This feedback may consist of feelings, sensations, thoughts, and behaviors which provide information that will keep the family functioning "on track" (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1980a).

Morphogenesis. While, as stated above, negative feedback attempts to return the system to its morphostatic state, positive feedback encourages the deviation from that previous state. This deviation from equilibrium is referred to by systemic theorists as morphogenesis.

This morphogenesis (or mechanism of change) is usually promoted by stress, or a stress factor. Napier and Whitaker (1978) distinguish stress factors as either acute situational (i.e., "predictable crises" altering the morphostatic state), interpersonal (i.e., conflict or disunity within a group perpetuating disharmony), or intrapersonal (i.e., conflict within the individual). Any one (or any combination) of these stresses, according to Napier and Whitaker, may be the catalyst to move to a morphogenic state.

If this morphogenic (changed) state is processed for a long enough period of time and amplified intensively enough in a system, according to Barnard and Corrales (1979), that

new attitude or behavior may be incorporated as an acceptable pattern within that system. Simply stated, an attitudinal or behavioral pattern may become acceptable through constancy and intensity.

Broderick and Smith (1979) point out that, although morphogenic responses may be deemed as acceptable within the system, they are not necessarily going to be viewed as acceptable by society (e.g., divorce, suicide, derseption, adultery, or intrafamilial homicide). Still, they insist, even though society deems these new responses as unacceptable, they must be viewed as an innovative change from the previous state. "The crucial issue is not the ethical attractiveness of the new response but that it is new. . . ." (Broderick & Smith, 1979, p.122).

Family Functioning. To summarize the above discussion of morphostasis and morphogenesis, a (family) system is constantly striving for morphostasis (equilibrium). Yet, when that system is challenged, it should respond through morphogenesis and move to a new state which, if maintained, may become the accepted state.

Through this summary, it is possible to understand why, according to Barnard and Corrales (1981), systems theorists generally agree that for a system to be functional (as opposed to "normal"), it must experience both morphostasis and morphogenesis. The stability of morphostasis when

combined with the flexibility of morphogenesis seems to constitute the most healthy range of family behavior.

Minuchin, Rosman, and Baker (1978) state that, unless the family is helped to maintain that balance between flexibility and stability, some member(s) will rightly feel trapped within a dysfunctional family system. According to Barnard and Corrales (1981), a balance of extreme rigidity and chaotic unpredictability constitute the general parameters of dysfunctional systemic behavior.

The balance within the dysfunctional family system is usually based upon one or more symptomatic behaviors. These behaviors, which are usually exaggerations of normal processes, generally reflect a failure to adapt by the system, according to Gurman and Kniskern (1981).

As a general rule, the involved system will pressure the symptomatic member(s) to continue in that role rather than change to help. As a result, any change in the symptomatic member (usually the IP) apart from the system is extremely difficult to maintain (Brill, 1978). This difficulty is, according to Jackson, the basis for systemic therapy where the focus is interpersonal, but not intrapsychic.

Russell, Olson, Sprenkle, and Atilano (1983) note that early family theory and research was not oriented toward

working with the system, but instead toward identifying one specific family pattern with a given symptom. They muse at the search for the "schizophrenogenic family" and the "alcoholic marriage." From the systemic perspective, these simple cause-effect, blame-placing relationships will not exist. In other words, while schizophrenia or alcoholism may provide a motivation and a focus for desired change (even for therapy), the internal balance between the mechanisms of morphogenesis to morphostasis in family system must be considered.

VHS Movies: Perturbations for Change

Even if only one of the component members of a system senses disequilibrium within that system, there is a need for systemic change. To induce this change, the individual sensing disequilibrium must either engage another agent (e.g., an external force) or utilize their personal resources (e.g., an internal pressure) to promote change.

Usually, when speaking of change-promoting agents, referred to as perturbations, society focuses upon persons or ideas involved in the helping professions (i.e., therapists/counselors, social service workers, doctors, or law enforcement officials). Questions exist, however, as to exactly what constitutes a perturbation. For example, must a perturbation be an idea placed within a system by one of the aforementioned professionals? Or, can a perturbing idea

be placed within the system by some means other than interpersonal contact?

Questions such as these are of special importance when discussing those families who cannot or will not seek professional help, though a need for systemic change may be sensed by one or more of the component members. Must these systems remain "in the rut" of dysfunction? If not, how and where can they get help?

If my hypothesis proves correct, the answer to this question may be "as close as the corner video store." For, VHS movies can be an exciting way to learn about a wide variety of subjects, with videos dealing with topics ranging from premarital counseling to divorce, from childbirth to aging and death.

Introducing the Family Focus VHS Video Guide

To utilize these movies as potential perturbations, however, there must be a means of organizing, even classifying, the films into a logical order. The Family Focus VHS Video Guide (hereafter referred as Family Focus) is aimed at solving the problem of organization and classification.

Organization. Family Focus is divided into sections with a macro-topic approach in mind. These topics include such concepts as family development and enrichment, cognitive and social skills, physical health and hygiene,

and family management. It was felt that this approach would prove more practical than to divide according to family micro-topics, such as aging and death, financial stresses, sex roles and stereotypes, and divorce adjustment when involving children.

Each of these macro-divisions contains movies which illustrate certain systems processes. For example, the first section of movies covered in Family Focus, family development and enrichment, addresses issues such as aging and death, divorce, and family values and traditions and are suggested for viewing by the entire family.

The movies in the adult personal development section, however, are suggested for more mature viewers. Subjects covered still relate to the family, but give special attention to more delicate issues such as drugs, sex roles, and parent-child and marital relations.

Family Focus also contains a section of VHS movies which concern the development of cognitive and social skills. While the topics (e.g., child sexual abuse and its effects and early personality development) in this section may not receive the public recognition that the topics in earlier sections recieved, it was recognized that these were points that can affect system and its struggle to maintain both morphostasis as well as morphogenesis.

The fourth section of Family Focus, physical health and hygiene, is similar to its predecessor in that it usually does not receive the public attention common to other more "popular" family subjects. In reviewing the films available, however, it was determined that they could be just as useful as those discussed earlier, particularly to systems experiencing difficulties in a field related to health and hygiene, such as family fitness, childbirth education, or stress reduction.

Family management is the fifth and concluding section of the Family Focus guide. The movies registered in this section include films dedicated to educating more mature viewers over a number of related micro-topics, such as family finances and budgeting.

Purpose. The Family Focus VHS Video Guide is designed to organize/classify a group of VHS movies selected through an independent survey. These movies have been selected to illustrate alternatives to the "traditional view" of a wide array of family system related topics.

This guide is presented simply as an educational tool, designed to promote self-education in the family system. If an individual and, systemically, a family is experiencing distress, it often the result of an inability to experience positive morphogenesis. Literally, the system may be "stalled out" at a point of disequilibrium and, as a result,

may be maintaining a state of dysfunction. It is this system that the Family Focus movie guide is aimed at.

While the component members of that "stalled" system either may not be able or willing to seek counseling, they may be willing to watch a VHS home movie. Thus, if Family Focus can help that family to choose a film based upon their current need, then it may be that the movie itself will act as a perturbation to the system, as a catalyst for change, hopefully toward a more suitable state of equilibrium. Pragmatically, as the number of home videos and video recorders increases, so does the potential for utilizing this form of, for lack of better terminology, "video therapy."

"Video Therapy" in Practice

The movie industry has, in the past year, made it a practice to offer VHS movies which, at least to the family system, may have significance. For example, three of the most recently released features, On Golden Pond (Thompson, 1984), Places in the Heart (Benton, 1985), and Yentl (Singer, 1984), each deal with an issue that could be a point of systemic dysfunction: aging and death, financial stresses, and sex stereotypes, respectively. (For specific excerpts, refer to Appendices A, B, and C.) However, each movie presents the idea that "the traditional option is not the only 'correct' option."

Common to any process which relies upon human reaction, however, the idea of a VHS movie serving as a catalyst for morphogenesis is not guaranteed success by any means. Even after viewing the selected film, family systems will exist who see absolutely no relation between their current situation and the situation of those persons depicted in the movie. For this system, the movie offers no alternatives, but only entertainment.

In other systems, it is even possible that, through viewing the selected movie, the component member recognizing disequilibrium may experience a change of heart and may realize that, while his/her current situation is not the best that it could be, but neither is it the worst. If this occurs, the current situation may, in review, be seen as something to be accepted rather than scorned and as systemically functional rather than dysfunctional.

There will be systems, however, that, after viewing the selected movie, will recognize that their current means of handling a situation is definitely not the only way and possibly isn't even the correct way to deal with it. In this system, the movie may have indeed planted the idea that prompted change to a more equitable state. This change, whether completed within the systemic or the therapeutic context, was initiated through self-education and, hopefully, the Family Focus VHS Video Guide.

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Appendix A

On Golden Pond

Scene One

Billy, a teenage boy, following the discovery of a dead

loon: Norman, are. . . are you afraid of dying?

Norman, an older man who had just turned eighty (gruffly):

What?

Billy : Are you afraid to die?

Norman: What the hell kinda question is that?

Billy: I was just wonderin'. That's all.

Norman: 'ell, I don't know why everybody has to talk about
everything all the time.

Scene Two

Ethel, Norman's wife, following his minor heart attack:

Norman, this is the first time that I've really felt
that we were going to die.

Norman: I've known it all along.

Ethel: When I looked at you, here. . . on the floor, I
could actually see you dead. I could see you. I could
see you in your blue suit and your white starched
shirt, and. . . .

Norman: How did I look?

Ethel: Not good, Norman. You've been talking about death
ever since we met, but this is the first time that I've
really felt it.

Norman: How does it feel?

Ethel: Oh. . . it feels odd. . . cold. . . not very bad,
really. Not so. . . frightening, almost comforting.

Appendix B

Places in the Heart

Scene One

Edna, speaking to Margaret, her sister, following the death of her husband (Distressed): Margaret. . . what's going to happen to us? . . I can't support this family. . . . I haven't the least idea of how to go about it. It seems like I. . . I haven't ever done anything all my life, except raise kids and take care of this house. . . . Russ paid all the bills. I never even knew how much salary he made. (Sighing.) What's going to happen to us?

Scene Two

Edna, visiting her banker, Mr. Denby (Nervously): Mister Denby, I was wondering if you could show me how to fill out a check? I never did it before, and I thought I'd best learn how.

Mr. Denby: Why, certainly, Mrs. Spalding. You know, it's just the simplest thing in the world. Now, up here, this is where you put the date.

Edna: Mister Denby, I was thinkin' that maybe it won't be necessary for me to sell my farm after all.

Mr. Denby: Well, of course it's necessary. Now I explained all of that to you yesterday. Down here. . . .

Edna: Yes, but I was thinkin' if. . . if I was to plant cotton. . . .

Scene Two (Continued)

Mr. Denby: Mrs. Spalding, you don't know the least thing about cotton farming.

Edna: Yes, I know, but. . . but Moses said. . . .

Mr. Denby: Moses. Who's Moses?

Edna: He's this negra man. . .

Mr. Denby: I don't know any negra around here named Moses.

Edna: Oh, well, he was just passin', passin' through and I gave him a job doin' some chores.

Mr. Denby: You mean to tell me your letting some negra hobo talk you into plantin' cotton. Did you ever hear of anything called the Depression? Now, you see these? (Holding a fist of papers.) These are all foreclosures and that's just in the last three months. . . and that's white men, been cotton farmin' all their lives, and they can't make a go of it. Now you're listening to some no-account negra man. You'll excuse me, Mrs. Spalding, but that's just about the most ignorant thing I've ever heard.

Edna (Furiously): I'm not ignorant. . . and I'm not selling my land. . . and I'm not giving my children over to anyone else to raise. I'm going out and I'm buying fifteen dollars worth of cotton seed. Now, I would appreciate it once again if you would show me how to write a check.

Scene Three

Moses, the Negro, following a discussion concerning the possibility of picking the county's first bale of cotton: After about an hour, the holes start cuttin' in your fingers, and then, about noon, both your hands is gone, and then all your fingers start to swell, and then, after a little more time, there ain't no feeling left in your hands whatsoever, and I ain't even speakin' about what it does to your knees, not even talkin' about what it does to your back. Now, we cain't do it. Now, get that through your head once and for all, we cain't do it. Now, you best stop thinkin' about it 'fore you end up killin' yourself.

Edna: Now, you listen to me. If we lose this place, then your going back to beggin' for every single meal, and, Mister Will (the blind boarder), they're going to put you in a state home, and I'm going to lose what's left of my family. I'm not going to left that happen; I don't care what it takes. I don't care if it kills me, I don't care if it kills you, I'm not going to give up, and, if the two of you do, you can go straight to hell.

Appendix C

Yentl

Scene One

Yentl, questioning her father about the difference in men
and women: Why is it that every book that I buy, every
bookseller who comes, uses the same old argument?

Father: You know why. . . .

Yentl: I'm jealous of them.

Father: The booksellers?

Yentl: No, not the booksellers, the students. . . talking
about life. . . the mysteries of the universe. . .
while I'm learning how to tell a herring from a carp.

Father: Yentl, for the thousandth time, men and women--

Yentl and Father (In Unison): --have different obligations.

Yentl: I know, but. . . .

Father: And don't ask why.

Scene Two

Anchel, who is the disguised Yentl, discussing Alvadore's
fiancee and his upcoming marriage: Is she always that
nervous?

Alvadore: She's a girl. . . in love. What do you expect?

Anchel: She doesn't say very much, does she?

Alvadore: What does she have to say?

Anchel: Don't you ever wonder what she's thinking?

Alvadore: No. . . . What could she be thinking?

Alvadore: Yeah, anyway. . . I don't need her to think.